

Overview

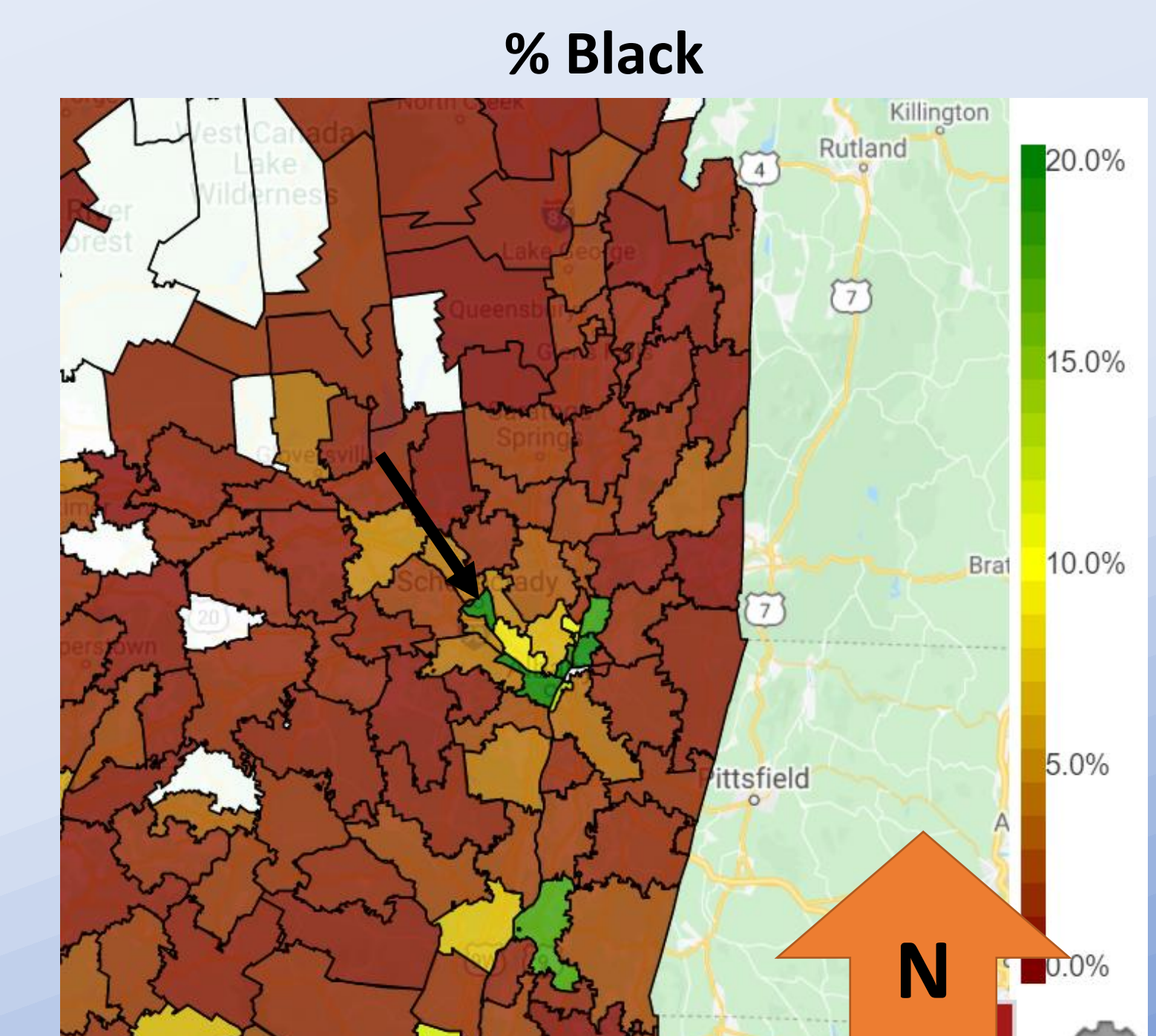
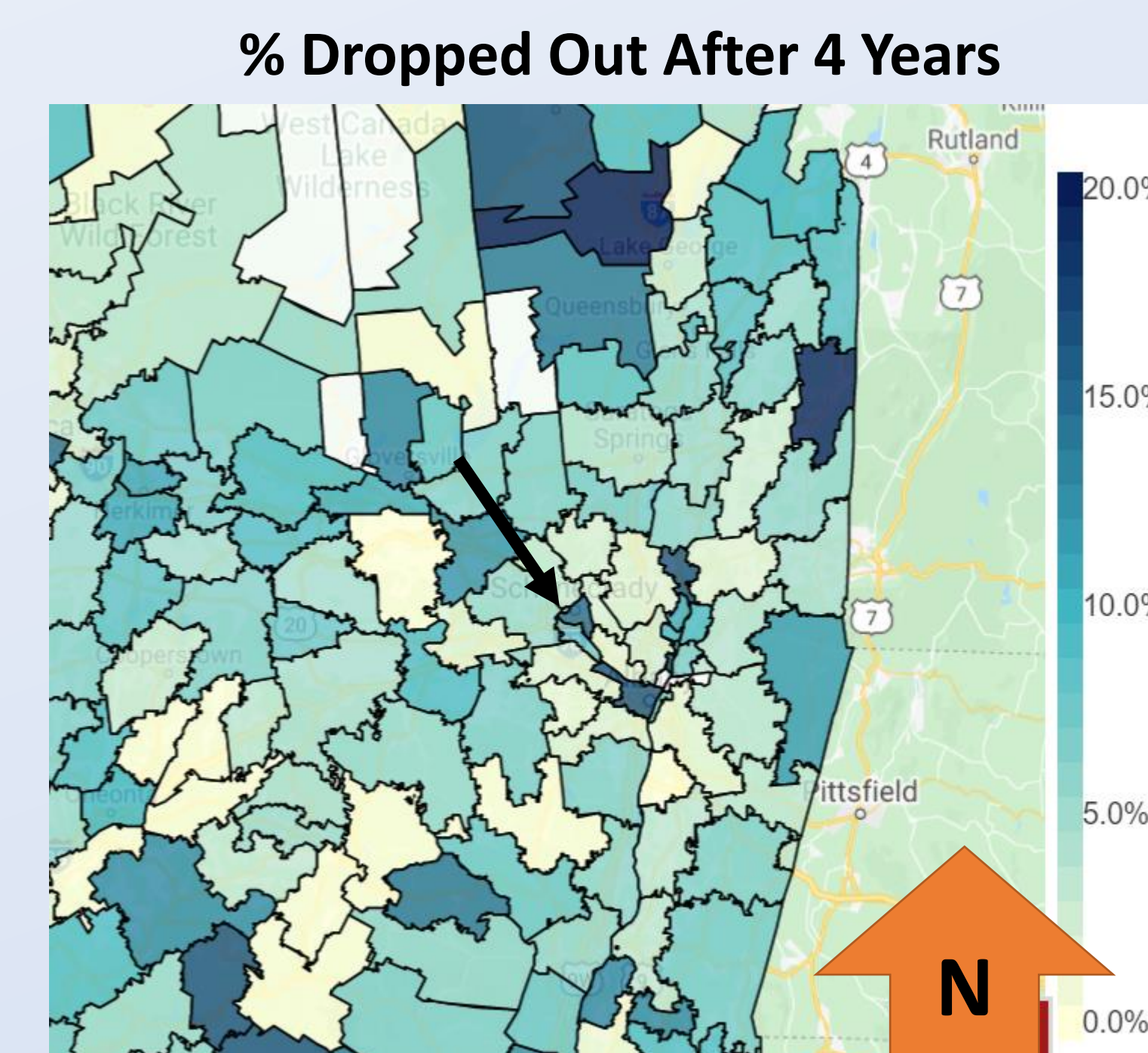
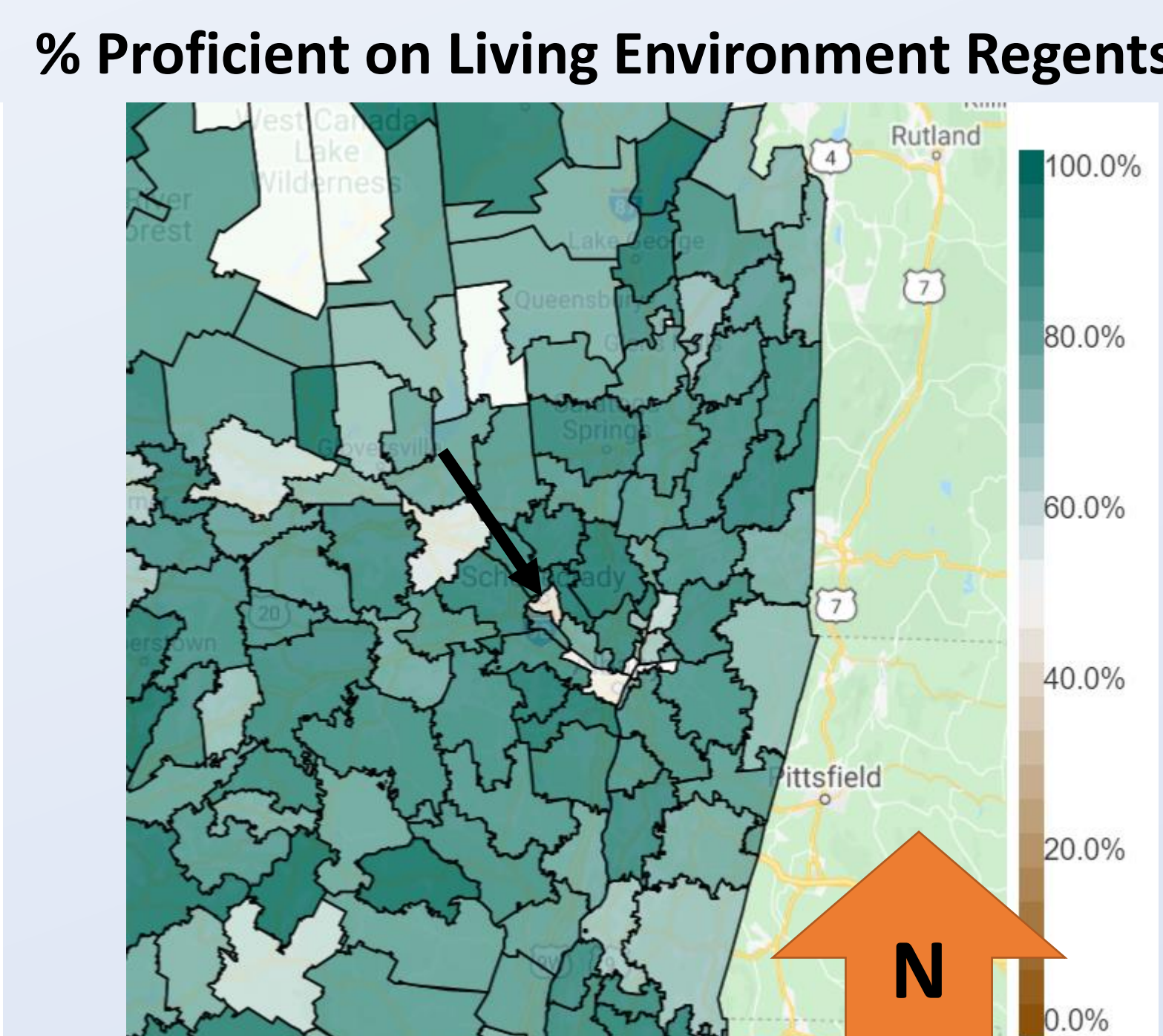
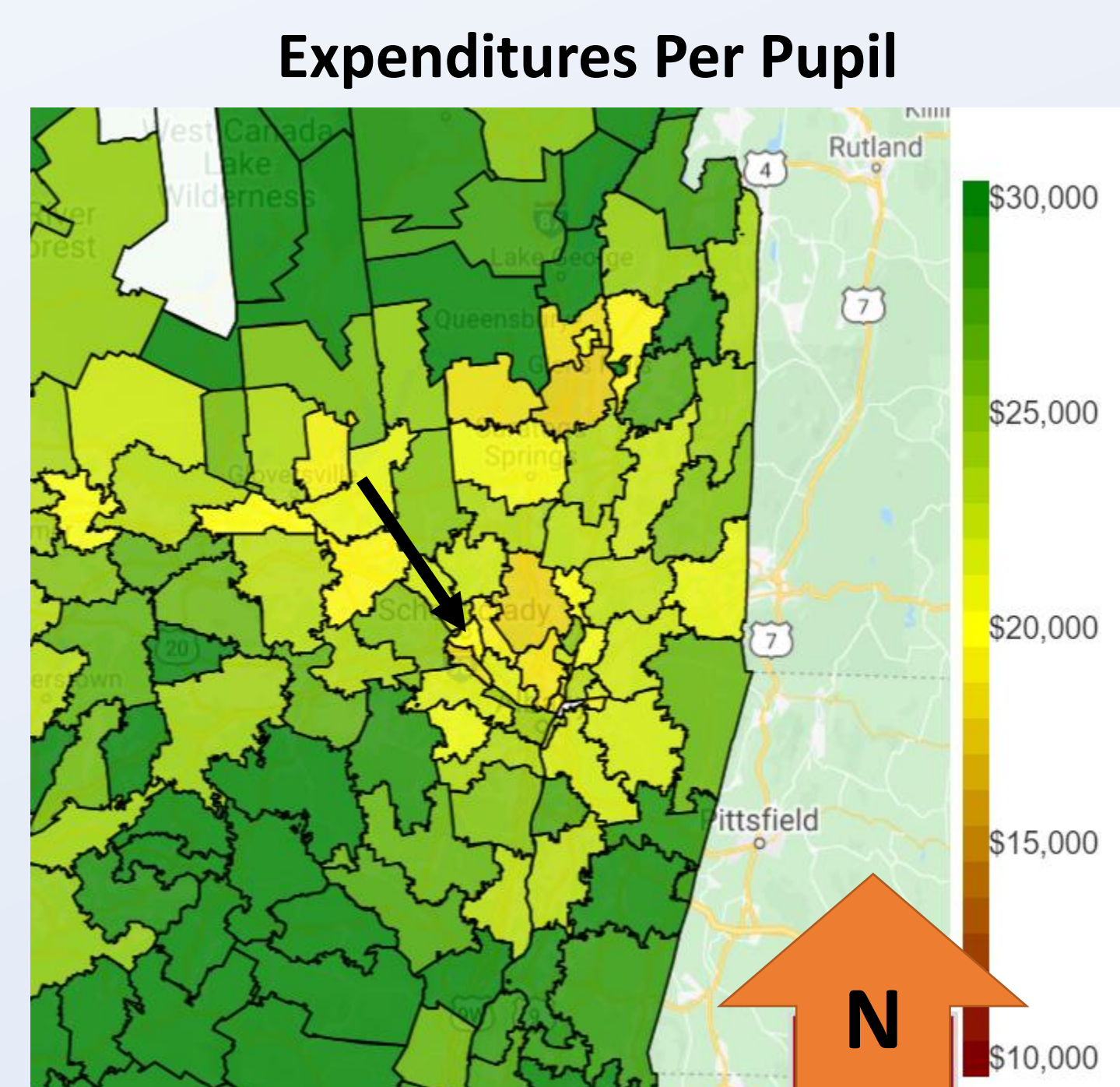
Through the support of the Minerva Exploration Grant I participated in an online education course at Finger Lakes Community College in the spring of 2020. My goal was to learn educational techniques and strategies to apply to my work at COCOA house (Children of Our Communities Open to Achievement). I was especially interested in practical activities to promote reading comprehension, improving engagement with math lessons, and generating a more socially conscious curriculum. As a tutor and supplemental instructor, I also saw the value in broadly improving my teaching abilities.

Union offers many opportunities for students to serve as peer mentors, tutors, and other forms of informal educators, but does not offer formal education classes. Through education classes at a local community college I hoped to gain useful skills that would enhance my own teaching abilities and would allow me to share this information with other volunteers and tutors on campus.

During the course I learned about the history of educational practices and the transition to more student-centered learning. The course also covered the complex roles of race and gender in education and the ways in which the modern education system favors affluent and predominantly white communities. Finally, we discussed the goals of modern educators and the need for educators to have a growth mindset towards their students. This material provided a useful theoretical background to understand my own education and the experiences of others. Unfortunately, I did not learn specific strategies for improving my teaching abilities as I had hoped.

My experiences suggest that, due to the emphasis on teaching history and theory, traditional introductory educational courses are not the best way to enhance the teaching abilities of Union students. Instead, for students who are educating others but not planning to pursue education as a career, informal teaching seminars and opportunities may be more effective. Offering courses or lessons on effective teaching strategies to tutors and peer educators may enhance the quality of education that Union students are able to provide to each other, and to the broader Schenectady community.

School funding and outcome metrics for districts in NYS. Schenectady school district is indicated by black arrow. Images are from Cornell University/NYS Education Data Tools and Visualizations Resource.



Course Content

History of Education

- 1700-1800's** – some public education. Lack of unified system for funding, training, and planning schools.
- 1837** – Horace Mann founds first state-wide schoolboard (MA) after expanding scope and region of public education.
 - Primarily one-room schoolhouses focused on basic reading, obedience, and manners.
- 1840's-1890's** – Teachers were primarily female and had a “missionary spirit” of expanding education to the poor and uneducated in return for low pay.
- 1867** – Federal school board is established to guide state on educational policy.
- 1896** – Plessy vs Ferguson establishes “separate but equal” education.
- 1890-1910's** – “Teacher’s Rebellion”. Teacher’s Unions form and teacher professionalization increases.
- 1920's** – John Dewey advances ideas of progressivism and flexible student-centered learning.
- 1955** – Supreme Court orders that schools desegregate “with all deliberate speed” in response to the 1954 Brown vs Board of Education ruling.
- 1983** – “A Nation at Risk” report is published highlighting deficits in teacher preparation and student outcomes.
- 21st Century** – Standards Movement promotes high stakes testing and teacher assessment based on student scores.
- (PBS, n.d.)

Characteristics of Quality Educators

- Set big goals for their students
- Constantly trying to improve their teaching
- Engage students and families in the educational process
- Plan extensively, both for small activities and for long-term goals.
- (Ripley, 2019)

Social Justice in Education

- Funding inequalities lead to educational and social inequities
 - State funding does not totally correct for local differences in property values and school revenues
- Black students are 12% less likely than white students to be recommended for gifted programs
 - Black educators are 3 times more likely than white educators to recommend students for these accelerated programs.
- Black students are 3.8 times more likely to experiences out-of-school suspension
 - Differences persist even after accounting for socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and student-reported behavior.
- (Weir, 2016)



Project Insights

Formal education classes taken at Finger Lakes Community College were not a good way to acquire hands-on teaching skills. The course focused principally on education history and demographics, topics which are redundant with courses such as “Schools and Societies, SOC-222”.

Student educators and tutors might benefit from learning the characteristics of quality educators, such as belief in their students and adequate lesson planning a preparation. According to the course, good teachers tend to observe and learn from others, suggesting that student educators might benefit from intensively observing professor’s teaching styles, and or observing the efforts of peer educators (Ripley 2019). In this course we learned about the characteristics of high quality memoirs by reading teacher memoirs and movies about teachers. This presented an idealized but helpful perspective on the actions of effective teachers.

Overall, the course material was useful to better understand the U.S. education system, and interested students should take relevant sociology and history classes at Union. Students who seek to casually improve their education skills should try to learn from professional educators instead of taking formal courses.

Acknowledgements and References

Many thanks to the Minerva Exploration Grant program at Union College.

Cornell University, D. (n.d.). Geo tools and visualizations. Retrieved May 06, 2021, from <https://www.nyeducationdata.org/geo-tools-and-visualizations>

National Center for Education Statistics. (1993, January). 120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait (1360090653 995235199 T. D. Snyder, Ed.). Retrieved May 06, 2021, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93442.pdf>

PBS. (n.d.). PBS online: Only a Teacher: Teaching Timeline. Retrieved May 06, 2021, from <https://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/timeline.html>

Ripley, A. (2019, December 18). What makes a great teacher? Retrieved May 06, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/01/what-makes-a-great-teacher/307841/>

Weir, K. (2016, November). Inequality at school. Retrieved May 06, 2021, from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/11/cover-inequality-school>